

Squatters handed £9 million five-storey Hampstead home

RASHID RAZAQ

SQUATTERS have been given permission to remain in a £9million Hampstead house rent free. The housing association that owns the five-storey Victorian property has agreed to allow up to 20 occupants who illegally took it over three months ago to stay on.

Calling themselves The Collective and hailing from Britain, France, America and Germany, the squatters moved into the empty house in Fitzjohn's Avenue. It is semi-detached and is believed to have 15 bedrooms.

Circle 33 housing association, which bought it for £8,770,000 in June last year, are letting them stay as long as they ensure the security and upkeep of the property.

Circle 33 is in talks with Camden council over the long-term redevelopment of the site.

A local estate agent estimated the property could command between £4,500 and £8,000 a week on the open rental market.

Ali Nathan, lettings manager at Hampsons International in Hampstead, said: "In all our time we have never known a single Victorian house on Fitzjohn's Avenue to come onto the market, most are divided



Nice pad: owners of the 15-bedroom house in Fitzjohn's Avenue are letting squatters stay

into flats. If it did come on the market it would probably be snapped up very quickly."

The new inhabitants, many sporting dreadlocks and tie-dyed clothing, have been welcomed by neighbours. One who has lived in the area for 10 years said: "They dropped leaflets

through introducing themselves and giving their telephone numbers if there were any problems.

"They all seem to be friendly, they wave hello when they come and go. They haven't held any noisy parties and we really haven't heard a peep out of

them. It's a bit bizarre them being allowed to live here rent free.

"It's not really fair when we pay so much but I feel safer having them here and it improves the condition of the house." The squatters refused to answer the door but a French

woman arriving at the house said she lived there: "We are a collective and we will have to make a decision as a community before we make any statement," she said.

At least one child is believed to live at the house and there were three cars and a scooter parked in the drive.

Next-door neighbour Ruth Steadman said: "They are not noisy or disruptive. We would rather have them next door than people having raves all night.

"They are no problem. They are our neighbours."

Circle 33 said: "The group approached our organisation requesting they be allowed to remain, and after full consultation with immediate neighbours we employed solicitors to prepare a licence to occupy.

"While this group has been in occupation there has been no feedback from neighbours to suggest any anti-social behaviour whatsoever."

The Hampstead squatters have received a much warmer reception than a group of ravers who took over a £10 million Primrose Hill property last month.

Police evicted these after they held 24-hour drink- and drug-fuelled parties which attracted hundreds of teenagers each weekend.

Interest rate hike fails to rein in house price boom

JAMES ROSSITER

HOUSE prices are still forging ahead, rising by an annual rate of more than 15 per cent, this month's figures show.

The Bank of England's quarter point interest rate rise last month has done nothing to slow down the property market's mini-boom.

The figures from the Nationwide show prices were up by an average of 1.3 per cent this month, equivalent to an annual 15.6 per cent rate of increase.

That means the value of the average UK house rose by the equivalent of £56 per day during the month, to £169,413. London has shown the biggest price inflation with homes in Kensington and Chelsea costing 25 per cent more today than in January.

Nationwide's group economist Fionnuala Earley said prices will continue to spiral — even if the Bank of England raises rates by another quarter point in November — because of the shortage of homes for sale.

Demand is largely fuelled by the return of the first-time buyer. Ms Earley says homeowners now typically get a £11,500 cash leg-up onto the housing ladder from parents remortgaging their homes. That would leave a first-time buyer needing to find just a further £2,300 to fund a 10 per cent deposit